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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to assess the current state of the art in master's level counseling practica, and to compare this with ACES Standards (1973) for recommended improvements in counselor training. A checklist instrument was used to secure information on theoretical approaches, practica models and focus, pre-practicum preparation, types of required experiences, supervision, time requirements, sites, and evaluation of students and programs. The results suggest a trend toward competency-based techniques and more pre-practicum laboratory type experiences. Most programs are eclectic in theoretical approach. The largest variations in practicum experience are in the areas of clock hours required, and numbers and types of sites used. Programs appear to need the most improvement in evaluation of individual counseling performance and over-all practicum program effectiveness. (Author)

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BEGINNING COUNSELING PRACTICUM

An Evaluation of the State of the Art in Large National Counselor Training Programs

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Although all counselor educators believe that their particular approach to counseling practicum is best, little is known about how such practica are conducted in programs across the nation. Thus, this study was designed to assess the current state of the art in master's degree level counseling practica and to provide information on degree of adherence to ACES Standards.

It has been commonly acknowledged that the practicum experience is of central importance in counselor training, providing for the "integration and application of knowledge and skills gained in didactic study." (ACES Standards, 1973) Recently, with the addition of both pre-practicum and field-work or internship experiences, the nature of practicum has become somewhat cloudy. For our purposes, a practicum is a closely supervised experience with actual clients, to distinguish it from pre-practicum experiences such as role-playing with other counseling students. Although the ACES Standards make the distinction between practicum (60 hours minimum contact with individuals and groups over a nine-month period) and internship (on-the-job experience, minimum of 300 clock hours), we used the term "practicum" broadly for all supervised work with actual clients.

METHOD

Sample

The sample included all counselor education programs in the United States which met the three criteria of having:

1) a minimum of six full-time faculty members;

2) a doctoral program in counselor education or counseling psychology;

3) a prestige rating of strong, good, or adequate by the Thoreson,

Krauskopf and Cox (1975) study on the reputations of various counseling programs.

The sample was selected from the faculty and program descriptions found in Hollis and Wantz (1974). The focus of the survey was on master's degree level practica. The assumption was made that strength of full-time faculty, institutional commitment to doctoral level training, and prestige within the profession would reflect high quality counselor training at all graduate levels.

Instrument and Procedures

A Quickie Practicum Checklist was developed. It included many easily answered factual items in such areas as theoretical approach; data on practicum supervision, supervisors, sites and students; and open-ended evaluation questions. In addition, respondents were requested to send any other practicum materials that they use, such as course descriptions and manuals.

This study was conducted during the 1975-76 academic year. The Checklist was sent to 44 programs, with one follow-up mailing, resulting in a total return of 84 percent (37 programs). Nine programs also sent additional practicum materials.

RESULTS

Theoretical Position and Practicum Model

Most of the counseling programs surveyed reflect an eclectic theoretical position, with few programs specializing in one approach. Eighty three percent of the programs stated that students may choose from among several diverse positions. Of the six programs that indicated

a specialized approach, two were behavioral in orientation and four were grouped as humanistic/Rogerian.

Fifty one percent of the respondents indicated that they are using the relatively new competency-based practicum models. However, only one-fourth of these were using this model exclusively, with most of the programs combining competency-based training with the traditional case study approach. Only 11 percent of the programs indicated that they use T-groups; all but one using it in combination with other models. Almost all (92 percent) of the programs agreed that the focus of practica was on integrating techniques and competencies with on-site experiences.

Pre-practicum Preparation

Approximately half of the programs (51 percent) have combined didactic course work with some type of pre-practicum laboratory experiences such as role-playing, micro-counseling and interpersonal process recall. Six other programs had students begin practicum immediately on entering the program. Generally, though, practica seemed to be used as an integrative experience in the latter part of the master's degree program.

Experiences Expected

The programs surveyed showed some variations in expecting different types of counseling experiences in practicum settings. However, all programs emphasized individual counseling, either personal (92 percent) or vocational-educational (86 percent). Added to the basic core of individual counseling were experiences in testing/assessment (62 percent), staffing cases (57 percent) and group counseling (54 percent). Behavior modification experience was expected in 32 percent of the programs, and it appeared that course work in this area was on an elective basis. Only 14 percent required

experience in research and program planning, and only five percent required experiences in training para-professionals.

Supervision

The majority of programs (60 percent) used a combination of on-site supervisors and practicum professors in supervising master's level practicum students. While 14 percent of the programs only utilized practicum professors, it was possible that they may also have doubled as on-site supervisors (as in the case of a department-operated counseling center). Almost two-thirds of the programs (65 percent) also used advanced graduate students, always in combination with on-site supervisors and/or practicum professors. These results indicated that the student was likely to be supervised by more than one individual.

Time Requirements

There was a wide variation in the amount of time required for practica. The total clock hours was a combination of direct client contact, supervision, and seminar; ranging from 60 to 390 hours per semester or quarter with a mean of 170 hours. Approximately 100 clock hours of the time was expected to be on-site, which is about six to eight hours per week. No program required less than the ACES Standards recommended minimum of 30 hours direct contact with clients per semester, with most programs requiring considerably more. However, the ACES Standards for internship (post-practicum on-the-job experience of 300 clock hours) did not appear to have been implemented in any program. Instead most programs seemed to have chosen to require a longer practicum, or in some instances, two practicum experiences. Also, most of the programs surveyed appeared to offer a one year master's degree, with a few having specialized programs in such areas as rehabilitation counseling that require two years to complete. With one

year programs, there was probably not time to incorporate the internship experience.

Sites Used

There was considerable variation in the percentages of students placed in each type of practicum setting. The preferences for placements in terms of median percentages of students placed were community agencies (25 percent), senior high schools (20 percent), universities (10 percent), junior high schools (10 percent), elementary schools (10 percent), hospitals/clinics (4 percent), and special schools (3.5 percent). The number of sites also varied widely, ranging from one site to a remarkable 70 different sites. (Mean - 26 sites, median - 20 sites). Six programs reported that they use in-house facilities for all students, with three of the programs combining these facilities with other practicum settings. One of the programs appeared particularly innovative in that the department staffs a family counseling center at a nearby Air Force base, thereby incorporating a wide age range of clients at one site. The dilemma that Becker (1974) discusses, of either having a large number of sites for diversity and flexibility or fewer sites for better accountability and to conserve staff time, seemed to have been resolved by most of the programs in favor of flexibility for individual students.

Full versus Part-time Study

The ACES Standards encourage the opportunity for full-time study throughout the academic year. Over half of the programs (52 percent) indicated that at least 75 percent of their master's students were attending full-time.

Evaluation of Students and Programs

The ACES Standards require "a planned procedure for a continuing evaluation" within each counseling program, for both the competencies of individual students and the effectiveness of the program. However, specific methods by which this evaluation would be accomplished are not spelled out in the Standards. Therefore, the checklist contained open-ended questions on how the effectiveness of both students and programs were evaluated.

In evaluating the competencies of individual students, most of the programs (61 percent) continued to rely on grade in the practicum course. However, few of the programs (11 percent) rely solely on a grade. Relatively subjective evaluations were most common, with 80 percent of the programs using on-site supervisors ratings and 30 percent utilizing peer evaluations. The subjective evaluations, though, were almost always used in combination with each other, so that a student was rarely evaluated by only one person. Several programs have incorporated more objective measures with subjective evaluations. Researched competency scales were used in 20 percent of the programs, and two programs reported using audio and/or video tape review of counseling sessions. In comparison with the number of programs (51 percent) that stated they used a competency-based practicum model, relatively few (20 percent) were currently using competency scales to evaluate the practicum learning of their students.

To evaluate the effectiveness of a counseling program in general, the ACES Standards recommend three channels: "1) former students, 2) supervisors in agencies employing graduates of the program, and 3) personnel in state and national licensing and accrediting agencies." Recognizing

that the evaluation of the effectiveness of a counseling program is inextricably tied in with the evaluation of the competency of its graduates, nonetheless there did seem to be less emphasis on evaluation of program than on evaluation of individual competency. Most of the programs (49 percent) utilized subjective feedback of students, faculty, and/or on-site supervisors, in a relatively unstructured, unplanned way. Only three programs used follow-up with employers of their graduates; and one other program utilized client feedback. Two other programs stated that they had research in progress. A surprising 19 percent rated their programs without indicating how they arrived at that evaluation.

SUMMARY

In general, there seemed to be a trend from the traditional practica approaches toward the incorporation of competency-based techniques, but competency-based evaluation methods were less widely utilized. Theoretical approaches ranged through the humanistic-behavioralistic continuum, although most programs espouse eclecticism. There was a wide variation in handling the details of practica, especially in the number and kind of sites used, as well as the amount of clock hours required. Most of the programs appeared to be continuing with a one year master's degree, with only one program indicating that it has moved to the adoption of the two year program as advocated in the ACES Standard.

The areas most in need of innovation and interest were the evaluation of student counselor's competencies and practicum program effectiveness. Program evaluation was not done very systematically and had more subjective than objective qualities.

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